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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the problems encountered by students in an introductory children's literature course as they planned and produced brief television presentations centered around picture books suitable for an audience of young children. A rationale for the project is provided as well as a detailed review of the planning process. The widely differing techniques used for presentations are briefly described, the attendant success factors and difficulties are indicated, and results of a questionnaire completed by students at the end of the course are discussed. It was concluded that a number of measures would be necessary to make this a more worthwhile project in children's literature courses where the time that can be devoted to it is minimal. (RAO)

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A CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ADVENTURE INTO VIDEO

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A CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ADVENTURE INTO VIDEO

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During the academic year 1976-77 at Memphis State University, students in an introductory course in children's literature were involved in an experimental project utilizing the instructional television studio. Because their experience was unique, and because it is our belief that it might be of interest to other instructors of children's literature, we want to report the nature of the experiment and suggest both the pitfalls and the successes they encountered, in the hope that others who may desire to conduct a similar learning experience may profit from our experiences.

At Memphis State University children's literature is taught in the Library Science department of the College of Education. It is a required course for all elementary education majors, but it is open to other students as well - for example, special education and library service majors. In the fall of 1976 we had four sections with an average size of 26 students.

Factors motivating our experiment included the following: first, some personal experience in an educational television course, which gave insight into its possibilities as a creative medium. To those who have not been introduced to television as a creative medium, whose experience is limited to passive viewing, the first introduction to the process of making a television presentation can be illuminating and intensely stimulating. So, at least, it appeared to us. Further, we were guided by an awareness of current educational theory as it has been influenced by the recent discoveries of the

bi-modal nature of human consciousness, which have important implications for the teaching and learning processes. According to the new discoveries, the left and right sides of the brain are specialized by function: the left side is the domain of logical, linear, analytical thought, whereas the right side is the source of intuitive, imaginative, artistic perception.¹ G. Lynn Nelson in "Zen and the Art of English Teaching" has urged "the use of creative projects in place of (or at least in addition to) tests. Tests - especially objective tests, but even essay tests - almost exclusively measure left-brain response. Creative projects allow students to use both sides of their brain... .."² To design a television presentation, in contrast to watching one passively, can be an exciting challenge to the imaginative powers of students and, we hoped, might open up the creative potential of our students' "right-brain" functions.

Still other motivating factors should be briefly mentioned. It was apparent that our course projects had in the past been primarily verbal in nature, except for the assignment of a bulletin board, which utilized the students' skills in collage. A project drawing upon visualizing skills, it was felt, would help to balance the heavy emphasis upon verbal learning and might spark the less verbal student's interest in children's literature in a more effective way. There were practical reasons as well: with TV facilities becoming increasingly common in schools, prospective teachers should benefit greatly from having some in-studio television experience. This is especially important if they are to be prepared to guide their own future students through student-planned uses of television facilities. Ultimately, this may be the most important goal of all - to lay the groundwork for the teachers' abilities to help their prospective elementary school students understand television as an instrument for their own expression - so that they might use

it rather than be used by it.

We have all read the depressing statistics pointing out how much time today's average child devotes to passive television viewing. While the effects of so much exposure to "the plug-in drug" remain debatable, one thing seems certain: ~~it is time~~ that children become actively involved in the creation of television presentations, so that they might use the new medium as a means of self-expression and begin to develop a sense of the "quality" of productions. Only then can they become selective and critical viewers (this being the aim, for there is no point in trying to make every child into a TV producer). We should be teaching our children how to use television in the same way that we teach them to use pencils, pens, crayons, typewriters, cameras, and all the other media of communication. A required course seemed an ideal ground for reaching a large number of future teachers with the fundamentals of the new technology. Finally, there was the sheer attraction of the experimental itself, of trying what had not been tried before, of exploring hitherto unexplored vistas. The technology is here, and it seems a waste to neglect the search into new ways of using it. The Memphis State University instructional television studio had just become operational, and we wished to take full advantage of the opportunities it offered.

The assignment for the project was made as early as possible in the semester. All students were told they were expected to create a brief presentation, averaging five minutes in length, centered around picture books suitable for an audience of young children. For the most part they were assigned to work in teams of two or sometimes three, and a few of the more daring students decided to work independently. Other than stressing to all that the basic purpose was to stimulate the child's interest in books, we

had no preconceived notion of what the programs should contain. We deliberately refrained from laying down specifications on content (other than as already mentioned, indicating the level as picture books) or on techniques, simply because we wished to give our students as much free rein for the exercise of their imaginations as possible.

We soon discovered that the scheduling of the use of the television studio in itself demanded careful planning. We were fortunate in several ways: first, to be located just adjacent to the studio, which made physical access easy; and second, to find our director, Mr. Jimmie Mattson, receptive to the idea and eager to cooperate. He indicated the blocks of time available for our groups and offered us the services of students from classes in television production to operate the equipment. Our children's literature students at no time were responsible for operating cameras, setting up lighting, working on the board, or doing similar technical tasks of production. Thus they were free to concentrate solely on planning and presenting the program to be taped. Since virtually all of them had no background in television production, this kind of technical help was vital to the success of our project.

To initiate our students to the studio, they were given a tour during which they had the opportunity to be on camera, operate a camera, view the control equipment, and understand its basic operation. The facilities are equipped for making productions of broadcast quality: there are two color studio cameras, a color film chain, a production video switcher with fourteen special effects and chromakey, and a video-tape editing system in a 3/4" format. These technical specifications, of course, were not of central interest for our students, but it was vital for them to know the number of cameras and their capabilities in order to be prepared to write the simple, basic scripts the project required.

The fall semester a graduate student came to our classes and discussed the essentials of script writing - such basics as planning the shots, describing the visuals to be seen on camera, planning the sound, remembering to look at the camera with the red light on, and other details that were invaluable to novices with no prior studio experiences. Spring semester, an introduction to script writing was incorporated into the studio tour, and, perhaps as a result, the scripts in general were not as detailed nor as well planned. Our experience indicates that time devoted to careful explanation of the fundamentals of script writing is very well spent.

As indicated above, our students had no responsibility for operating TV equipment. For this we were indebted to undergraduate students from speech and drama classes, plus one graduate student assigned to the studio. The fact that both the crews and the performers were inexperienced contributed to some technical problems; however, it may be that our students were sometimes more at ease to know that the others involved were learning also.

The Library Science department supplied the videotapes, 3/4" cassette tapes sixty minutes in length. This was our only major expenditure. Because our studio does not yet have a character generator, the department also purchased in the spring semester a Magic Master Titling Set, actually designed for home movie titling. Some of our students found this useful, for it saved them the time and expense of purchasing materials to letter their visuals. They were asked to provide at least two visuals (more might be demanded by the nature of their presentation): an opening title, giving the picture book title, author, and illustrator, and a closing credits visual, showing the names of the students involved in the production. (We neglected to advise them to leave at least thirty seconds blank between productions; this, as we discovered later, would have been helpful when it came time to locate the

productions on the tapes and to provide leeway in starting and stopping them when they were played back for an audience.) Studio props were available for our students' use; these included tables, sofas, chairs, and an easel for visuals.

Students in the fall semester worked most generally in teams of two, with each team being scheduled for thirty minutes in the studio to produce a five-minute show. This proved to be far too short a time for the creation of a quality presentation. We learned from experience that more time was needed, and hence, in the spring, when our enrollment was lighter, students were given the option of an individual presentation or working in groups of up to four. The maximum time length for the finished production was increased to ten minutes. Groups were scheduled for an hour of studio time, and individuals were assigned thirty minutes. This timing schedule proved much more satisfactory.

The presentations used widely differing techniques and produced correspondingly various results. Methods used included the following:

1. Puppets alone with "voice-over"
2. Some combination of puppets and people on-camera
3. Flannelboard and storyteller
4. Interview format, with a prepared Super-8 film as a visual medium
5. Reading or telling a story to a live audience of children on-camera
6. Filmstrip with voice-over
7. Storytelling with chalkboard illustrations
8. Reading the story and showing the pictures on-camera

The relative success of the differing approaches, as we evaluated them, was as follows: Method 1, using puppets exclusively on-camera, seemed to achieve a polished effect most readily. It also freed the more camera-shy

students from the pressures of stage fright. However, this type of presentation was probably also one of the most time-consuming, since considerable time was required to make the puppets and rehearse them, over and above the need for careful scripting. As great as the potential appeal of puppet presentations may be, we found those created by our students suitable for preschool audiences rather than kindergarten or primary graders. One group using this method found it desirable to tape their entire sound-track ahead of time. This worked very well except for a technical problem in the sound reproduction.

Method 2, combination of people and puppets - a la "Kukla, Fran and Ollie," proved to be a versatile and promising technique. Its success hinged chiefly upon the liveliness of vocal and facial expressions the students were able to achieve.

Method 3, the flannel board and storyteller combination, was moderately effective, but the necessity to pause for removal and replacement of the figures on the board caused some distractions. This technique could be highly effective with careful scripting to provide another focus for the camera while the flannel board is being changed.

Method 4, the interview format, with use of prepared Super-8 film, required a great expenditure of time in advance preparation. Unfortunately, technical problems beyond the control of our students arose, and it is therefore difficult to evaluate this technique. It would appear to be a promising one, but demands careful scripting and preparation on the part of the studio crew.

Method 5, reading or storytelling to children on-camera, alternating with prepared visuals of scenes from the book, depended heavily, again, upon the expressiveness of the reader or storyteller. For this type of production to

succeed, sound quality of all voices - both readers' and childrens' - is crucial, and it seems essential to choose a type of story that lends itself to participation on the part of the children.

Method 6, a filmstrip as a basis, with voice-over, obtained the most professional-looking visuals. Only one group attempted to use this technique, choosing the filmstrip of "Where the Wild Things Are" for their presentation. Character voices were adopted with good effect.

Method 7, storytelling while drawing chalkboard illustrations, used by only one student, depends for its effectiveness on a number of things: first, a story that lends itself to "incremental" drawing, so that nothing need be erased, and second, the storyteller's skill at drawing freehand. Further, this format is greatly enhanced by the ability to tell the story with animated voice and facial expression.

Method 8, simply reading the story while showing the pictures on-camera, was the most commonly used, perhaps because some students did not choose stories with enough action or failed to read with enough enthusiasm to hold the attention of the viewer. Using different voices for different characters was one way of increasing interest. It proved useful to have duplicate copies of the picturebook, one to use for visuals, the other from which to read. To vary this method, some students appeared on-camera in costumes selected to carry out the theme of a given book - eg., in witches' attire to accompany a presentation of a book on Hallowe'en. Spooky sound effects, obtained from a record, heightened excitement. Many students, however, chose simply to read the story while showing the pictures. This was - predictably, no doubt, the most usually disappointing mode of presentation, partly because it is almost impossible to hold the book at precisely the right angle for the camera to obtain good-quality reproduction. (Those who used a duplicate copy of the

picture book, flattened out on a visual board, obtained somewhat better results, but this too had technical difficulties.) Some students had good success with xeroxing the pictures, then coloring them with crayon, and laying them flat on a visual board. This worked particularly well with simple line-drawings.

In all formats, many students found it effective to use a musical background to the title to create a mood at the introduction of their programs, and again at the end when the credits were shown. More music and sound effects would have increased the effectiveness of many of the presentations.

In general, the most pressing problems encountered were (a) the difficulty of obtaining a high-quality, distortion-free sound (a technical difficulty beyond the control of our students); (b) the short-comings discussed above, resulting from attempts to use the picturebook itself for visuals; (c) the need, on the part of most of the students, to use their voices in a more expressive and lively manner: Obviously, some have more natural talent than others in this direction, but many needed to work harder on this aspect of their productions. Clearly, telling the story is to be preferred to merely reading it, especially when the reader's eyes are averted a good part of the time. Liveliness of vocal and facial expression was one of the most crucial factors affecting the quality of the presentations; (d) the weakness of some students' scripts, which tended to be overly sketchy; (e) the problem of copyright, if the program is to be shown over TV. Many authors and illustrators are concerned about how their books are used, even in learning situations;³ (f) grading the presentations presented problems, especially when we knew the students had spent hours preparing one that just did not come across as it should have. There was an obvious difference in the quality of the productions; some of the problems were caused by inexperienced crews

and actors. Some of the best productions had trouble with the sound; this appeared to be an equipment problem rather than a human element; (g) the need to keep the original tape as a master tape and to make an additional copy to show, was impressed upon us. We found to our dismay that differences in equipment can cause a tape to jam and part of a show can be irretrievably lost unless preserved on a master copy.

At the conclusion of a semester, questionnaires were distributed to each class. Unfortunately not all students responded, but we do have results from the majority. Fall semester every responding student wrote a paragraph commenting on the project, and most thought it was too time-consuming and not all that relevant to the course. In the spring few students wrote comments, but simply checked the boxes. Interestingly enough the overall percentage results were comparable.

For purposes of analysis, the categories "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree" were combined into three categories: agree, neutral, and disagree. In response to the statement "The video project has been a valuable educational experience," 53.2% in the fall and 61.7% in the spring felt it had. Those who disagreed were, respectively, 26.5% in the fall, and 17% in the spring. But the neutral vote was 20.3% and 21.3%. In response to the statement "This project should become a regular part of the course," the fall semester results were: 41% "agree," 20.5% "neutral," and 38.5% "disagree." The results for spring were 45.5% "agree," 15.9% "neutral," and 38.6% "disagree."

Because of limited class time, only selected presentations were shown to the entire class, but the tapes were on reserve in the Learning Media Center so students could see any many as they wanted. In response to the statement, "All video productions should be replayed for the entire class

during regular class time," the fall results were: 46.9% "agree," 21% "neutral," and 32.1% "disagree." Spring results were 60.5% "agree," 9.3% "neutral," and 30.2% "disagree."

The statement, "Students should be given a choice between doing a video project or some other type of project (eg. a paper, a slide show, etc.)," produced the following results: fall, 68.3% "agree," 16.5% "neutral," and 15.2% "disagree;" spring, 67.4% "agree," 17.4% "neutral," and 15.2% "disagree." A related statement, "Given the choice, I would rather participate in a story telling project with an audience of live children," produced similar responses: fall, 58% "agree," 24% "neutral," and 18% "disagree;" spring 63% "agree," 24% "neutral," and 13% "disagree."

When asked if what they had learned from the video experience would help them in their future work, the responses were: fall 47% "agree," 24% "neutral," and 29% "disagree;" spring, 54.3% "agree," 21.7% "neutral," and 24% "disagree."

Students in the fall semester spent more time in preparation, with the majority falling in the 9-14 hours category. In the spring, students as a whole spent less time in preparation, with the majority in the 6-9 hours category. However, the spread of time devoted to the project in the spring was greater, with some people spending in excess of twenty hours, and a sizeable number less than five hours.

Our conclusion is that a number of measures are necessary to make this a more worthwhile project in children's literature courses where the time that can be devoted to it is minimal. First, team-size should be increased to three or four persons, with specific responsibilities assigned to each. They should be given a choice, as much as possible, of their roles, but it should be clear who is responsible for what. Roles could be assigned as

follows: one serving as scriptwriter; one developing visuals; one or two providing on-camera talent (or in the case of puppet productions, making and working the puppets). In addition, someone ought to assume specific responsibility for sound effects, which may be simple or complicated; this could be assigned as one student's total responsibility. Moreover, there should be more opportunity for interplay and cooperative planning between the children's literature students and the students comprising the studio crews. A full sample script should be prepared and given to all class members, and orientation in the preparation of visuals should be provided.

Ideally, students should have the chance to see how children actually respond to their tapes. So far, it has not been possible for us to provide this experience. To this point, we can comment only upon the usefulness the project has had for our own students, and this is still open to question. It may also be that a television project of this type would fit better into a methods course in children's literature, where it would tie in naturally with story-telling and creative dramatics. Another possibility would be an entire course devoted to the use of television as a medium for children's literature; such a course might ideally be an interdisciplinary one, involving students in both the imaginative raw materials available in picture storybooks and the techniques of TV studio production. Students completing such a course would presumably be admirably well prepared to guide their own future elementary and secondary students in the creation of their own television presentations. This creative activity on the part of the young students is, in the final analysis, what we would most like to encourage. It seems necessary to involve children in making television an instrument of their self-expression, if we are to counter the negative effects of their spending so much time as passive viewers.

One final observation seems necessary: we were surprised by the high percentages of "neutral" responses to so many of our statements on the questionnaire. Overall "neutral" responses averaged 21% for the fall and 18.3% for the spring. It is puzzling at the very least to ponder the underlying reasons for such a high degree of apathy towards a class project so potentially exciting. Someone once observed that "impression without expression equals depression." Could it be that the apathy of so many of today's students can be explained by their backgrounds of passive, "impressive" (rather than "expressive") education?

References

1. Ornstein, Robert: The Psychology of Consciousness. San Francisco, CA, W. H. Freeman, 1972.
2. Media and Methods, 12: 27-28, May/June, 1976.
3. May, Jill P.: Copyright Clearance Problems in Educational Television: Children's Materials." Journal of Library Education, 17: 149-160, Winter, 1977.

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The video project has been a valuable educational experience.					
2. This project should become a regular part of the course.					
3. Assigning two students to a team for each production seems to work well.					
4. I would prefer to work on a project such as this with a larger number of students (i.e., more than 2 to a team).					
5. More class time should be given to preparing students for their video productions.					
6. The class time spent on how to write a script was helpful.					
7. All the video productions should be replayed for the entire class during regular class time.					
8. Only selected video productions should be shown in class.					
9. I would like to have had the chance to see more of the productions during class time.					
10. Students should be given a choice between doing a video project or some other type of project (eg. a paper, a slide-show, etc.)					
11. Given the choice, I would rather participate in a story-telling project with an audience of live children.					
12. I believe that what I have learned from my video experience may help me in my future work.					
13. If a friend of mine enrolls in the course and has the option of doing a video project or not, I would advise him or her to do so.					
14. The assignment was clearly presented and I had a good concept of the purpose of the tape.					

The number of hours my partner and I spent in planning for the video program was:

More than 20 _____ 15-20 _____ 10-14 _____ 6-9 _____ 5 or less _____